DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 334 UD 031 824

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TITLE Nonviolent Leadership: A Concept Whose Time Has Passed?
PUB DATE [97]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Age Differences; Black Culture; Black History; *Black Leadership; Civil Rights; Printed Materials; United States History; Violence; *Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS *King (Martin Luther Jr); *Nonviolence

ABSTRACT

The attitudes of youth in the middle of the 1990s are in often contrast with the those of Martin Luther King, Jr. This paper considers why so many young people have strayed from King's principles. An examination of periodical literature in the 1990s shows that King's family members are among the few voices that still praise his nonviolent methods, and they recognize that a culture of violence has replaced the message of nonviolence. The paper also explores the dichotomy of retaining respect for the man, but not his message. Many of today's young black people respect and look up to the late civil rights leader. They pay homage to his contributions during the annual national holiday held in his honor, but the same youth are not hesitant about criticizing and feeling alienated from King's teachings on nonviolence. The teaching young people have received through schools and society presents peace advocates in a negative light. Nonviolence must be recorded in a positive light, and its accomplishments must be recorded as a component of the historical mainstream. It is especially important that African Americans learn their own history. The only way to evaluate the present plight of black people is to compare it with the past. Nonviolent leadership is not only still relevant, it is needed more than ever. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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Nonviolent Leadership: A Concept Whose Time Has Passed?

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This study is a comparison between attitudes of youth in the midnineties versus the historical philosophical teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. The paper will attempt to plot the later trend in thinking and to answer why so many of King's posterity have strayed from his principles.

The paper will also examine the dichotomy of retaining respect for the man, but not his message. We believe that many of today's youngsters respect and look up to the late Civil Rights leader. They pay homage to his contributions during the annual national holiday held in his honor. Yet, these same youth are not hesitant about criticizing and feeling alienated from King's teachings on nonviolence. Is this paradox logical?

Both historical philosophical reflection and an examination of current social thinking will be presented.

Dickerson (1987) has unequivocally stated that in African American history there have only been two mass leaders who have arisen from within the ranks of their own people. Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King, Jr. Certainly both garnered mass followings. Furthermore, both of their leadership positions were developed and supported by black people themselves.

In the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., however, it appears that his leadership among younger African Americans may not be as highly regarded as it was among his contemporaries. The youth's unfavorable view of King is especially aimed at his philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience.

In fact, many of the young seem to have adopted violence as a way of life. For example, juveniles between the ages of ten and seventeen have seen their arrests for violent crimes soar from 54,860 in 1970 to 122,434 in 1993. In 1993, of those arrested for murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, persons under fifteen years of age accounted for 11.9 percent. In addition to being arrested for murder, the young are being victimized as well. In 1993, of a total of 23,271 victims, 12,196 were under thirty years of age. A total of 7,032 were black. Furthermore, in 1992 black males accounted for 10,131 homicide victims out of a total of 25,488 (Bureau of the Census, 1995). Thus, the statistical composite sketch confirms that young black males are particularly vulnerable to violence.

It is the position of this paper that this segment of the population has renounced the prominent nonviolent philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. The modus operandi of the modern civil rights movement has been abandoned by the generation of African Americans who have emerged since that period.

The philosophy of nonviolence as espoused and practiced by King resulted from the clergyman's own intellectual and spiritual development. It was from his study of various thinkers

and activists that King gleaned his approach to confront evil in a moral and ethical manner through nonviolence. Particularly, King was influenced by Gandhi. Although King had studied others such as Rauschenbusch, Thoreau, Niebuhr, and others, it was in the teachings of Gandhi that he matured and found his nonviolent niche.

According to King (1958), his philosophy consisted of six basic characteristics. They were:

1. Nonviolent resistance was not a cowardly act.
2. Nonviolent resistance was not intended to destroy an opponent, but to win him.
3. Nonviolent resistance is directed against evil rather than the person who is doing evil.
4. Nonviolent resistance is willing to accept suffering without retaliation.
5. Nonviolent resistance not only avoids external physical violence, but refuses to hate as well.
6. Nonviolent resistance is based on the belief that the cosmic order is on the side of justice.

These characteristics are very idealistic. According to King's view, nonviolent resistance was designed to bring out the best in the human spirit. If this be the case, then it was only logical for him to believe that there were advantages to be gained from the nonviolent method. According to King (1963), 1) Nonviolent resistance allowed one to divest one's self of passivity without being vindictive; 2) Nonviolent resistance is proof that its practitioner has risen above the old societal concept of an eye-for-an-eye; 3) Nonviolent resistance allows universal participation without the restrictions of age, sex, and physical ability hindering any; 4) Nonviolent resistance paralyzes and confuses the opponent; 5) Nonviolent resistance allows those who have a disadvantage to defeat

superior physical opponents.

For King, these advantages were apparent. He clearly understood the need for spiritual integrity. He was influenced by both Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative and the biblical golden rule, "to do unto others as you would them do unto you" (Luke 6:31). King believed that the crusader for justice had to be as mindful of the means used as well as the end that he sought. In King's view, one could never arrive at a moral destination by using immoral means. One could never acquire love through hatred.

Since the days of Martin Luther King, Jr., it has become apparent that there has been an attitudinal straying from his teachings. From periodical literature published in the 1990s, it appears that King's family is one of the few voices who still praises his nonviolent methods. Comparing King's philosophy to other historic African American leaders, his widow, Coretta Scott King (1995) said: "I acknowledge the great contributions of W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X and so many others. But it was Martin who grabbed history by the reins and led our liberation movement with an uncompromising commitment to active nonviolence, to the achievement of unprecedented historic reforms most thought would be unattainable in this century" (p.56). It is clear from this statement that King's wife still sees nonviolence as a unique and virtuous philosophy. In fact, in her view it was this method that made her husband distinct from other African American leaders.

Yet King's impact on his posterity at large has not been long lasting. Even his daughter, Yolanda King, when citing the effects of change wrought by her father's efforts seems to identify a grudging progress in human relations. She stated, "I think in many instances there is greater tolerance, greater respect, greater recognition that like it or not, we are going to have to find a way to live together and work together" ("After 28 years", 1992, p. 62). This statement suggests that

the greater "respect" and "recognition" have not come willingly. Rather, Yolanda seems to be saying that circumstances have driven society to become more indulging of diversity.

Despite their obvious admiration for King's philosophy and work, his family has been unable to ignore posterity's abandonment of his nonviolent teachings. Twenty-eight years after his assassination, Coretta urged the nation to turn from the path of blood that has become all too prevalent. She said, "We call you to join us in putting an end to the toxic culture of violence that has engulfed our nation and world" ("Nation Recognizes 28th", 1996, p. 62).

This call by King's widow is emblematic of a wide-spread recognition of the desertion of his philosophy of nonviolence. The former governor of Virginia, L. Douglas Wilder, twenty nine years after King's "I Have a Dream" speech said, that he believes Dr. King would open his eyes in 1992 to a nightmare. Americans are gripped with fear. Black Americans kill each other at a terrifying rate ("After 28 years" 1992).

In addition to the black on black violence, Wyatt T. Walker, a former close associate of King, cited another source of violence in the post-King years. Walker pointed out, that there are no more lynchings in the South. Lynchings have moved North to Detroit, New York, Seattle, etc. Many of which have been at the hands of the police establishment ("After 28 years" 1992).

Many of the young who have witnessed the proliferation of violence have become convinced that the only way to fight back is with more violence. Ironically, while many personally admire King, they think of his nonviolent tactics as outmoded and no longer useful. For example, Vail Longely, a teenager from North Memphis in referring to King said that, he was a great man, but what fit then doesn't fit now. Teenagers are more violent now and less patient. Likewise, Ernest Powers, another Memphis teenager has a similar perspective of King. He said, that Dr. King was

a very spiritual man, but his time had come and passed (Bundy, 1996).

It is clear from these comments that the younger generation does not appreciate King's tactics. In fact, those who were not born under the rule of Jim Crow even question the value of the gains achieved through King's efforts. Representative of this sentiment are the comments of Myron Briggs, a student at the University of Memphis. Briggs declared: "Sure I may be able to ride in the front of a bus now and kids may be able to attend all-White schools, and now I can vote, but all that hasn't made it easier for me to get a loan at a bank, secure a job, or become president of General Motors" (Bundy, 1996, p 3A). Such a view not only questions nonviolence, but the whole agenda of the Civil Rights movement. These comments see no progress in the desegregation of public utilities and the privilege to vote.

It is ironic that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work should be viewed in such a light by the very people he helped. Young African Americans who enjoy rights that King sacrificed to win are the most cynical toward the prophet of nonviolence. Many of them reject not only his method of nonviolent civil disobedience, but his agenda of the brotherhood of humankind and the ideal of an integrated society as well.

It is strange that during the nineties a surprising alignment of support for King has arisen. Perry as early as 1991 wrote of this shift in how King and his legacy are viewed. According to Perry (1991), King's stock has been going down for years....He's almost a nonentity among the generation of African Americans that have come of age in the last decade. For whites, meanwhile-the non-reactionaries at least-he's become altogether safe. It is bizarre that history would now witness such an alignment of support for King's contributions. The fact that white America would now find King safe is a far cry from the way he was perceived during his career. The Montgomery

Advertiser during the 1955 Bus Boycott allowed many of its white readers to infer that King was "uppity and devious" (Branch, 1988). This view of King was prevalent throughout the white South. He was labelled a trouble-maker. On one occasion in the late eighties, an elderly businessman stated that black preachers were fine except for "that fellow, Martin Luther King." He went on to say, that he did not believe he was a preacher (Walker, 1992).

For one who suffered such maligning for the fair treatment of his people, it is now disturbing to hear so many young African Americans speak in an unappreciative and down right suspicious way of King and his nonviolent methods. In 1994 a story was reported that many African American youth were questioning whether a national holiday should be in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X (Bennett, 1994).

Many of the nineties' black youngsters see King's work as having reaped minimal or no results. Having not experienced the degradation of a segregated society, the young see little improvement in the plight of black people. Lucille Grey at the age of sixteen said of King, "We're told of a great man who led his people from bondage, ... but we're still in bondage" (Bundy, 1990, p. 3A).

According to Timothy Wyman, a professor at the University of Connecticut, many African-American youth are suspicious and even resentful as to why Martin Luther King, Jr. is the only civil rights leader who has official mainstream acknowledgment (Bundy, 1990). With King being the only African American in such prominence, many of the young view him and especially his advocacy of nonviolence as being easier to deal with than Malcolm X's bold statement, "by any means necessary," which is most frequently taken out of its context.

Contributors to this transition in thought toward nonviolence and its most famous proponent,

Martin Luther King, Jr. are varied. Numerous trends are emerging which challenge traditional values and beliefs. Since the eighties, strong emphasis upon materialism and individual greed have prompted the young to adopt these two characteristics as integral components of their persona. Many young people in the African-American community, regardless of their family's economic background believe personal wealth is the most important human trait. From Memphis' middle-class Whitehaven subdivision comes Luther Carodine, who said that to survive in this society today, one has to be in the forefront (Bundy, 1990). The same sentiment is heard in the less affluent North Memphis section.

Further complicating the emphasis upon possessions is a sense of radical individualism. In a candid and cynical way Cleopatra Smith had an uncomplimentary view of society. She said, "There is no honor anymore, ... nobody gives a damn about you so you have to give a damn about yourself. If you don't, you'll just get swallowed up in the maze" (Bundy, 1996, p.3A).

Such negative perspectives are not inventions of the young. These messages have been conveyed to them. The media in general and television in particular have been enormously influential in molding the thinking of young African Americans. Professor Wyman said: "African Americans didn't really understand what they didn't have until television exposed them to all the material splendors, ... it has even taught them how to get what they want through unconventional and sometimes illegal ways. It has helped shape their values and encouraged their distrust in spiritual resolves in which their parents and grandparents believed" (Bundy, 1996, p 3A). With the advent of competition from cable channels, network television has become bold and more permissive in its lessons. Profane words and unconventional behavior have become common in television programming. Hence, it is only natural that young impressionable minds will become

influenced by such exposure.

In addition to television's pro-active message of violence and vulgarity is history's omitted lessons. In the case of black people, little is recorded in history texts and taught in classrooms about wholesome black role models. For example, when I asked a class of thirty-seven primarily college freshmen and sophomores how many had heard of Marcus Garvey, only five raised their hands. In fact, the neglect of black history is so acute that high school student, Lucille Grey said many students were not really sure why Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday was important (Bundy, 1996). If students are now unaware of African American history, then they have no way of gauging the progress level of black people. If they do not know from what level the black experience has emerged, it is understandable why so many are cynical and negative toward the accomplishments of King's nonviolent work.

Also at fault is the way in which history is written and studied. Traditionally, history has recorded the heroes of the past as being political and military leaders. Every school age child knows of the exploits of Alexander the great, Julius Caesar, Hannibal, and Napoleon Bonaparte. On the other hand, it was reported that in a course entitled "The American Tradition of Nonviolence" at the University of Missouri, the students enrolled in the course had never previously heard of A. J. Muste (Cochran, 1995).

Furthermore, when nonviolent proponents are studied, they frequently are presented in an unfavorable light. Those who have opposed war have been portrayed as unpatriotic. For example the anti-Viet nam war protest of Bill Clinton has been seen as his political burden as president of the United States. Henry David Thoreau has been thought of "as an eccentric, antisocial crank." Mohandas Ghandi is frequently presented as an extremist ascetic. Even Martin Luther King, Jr. is

conceived of as a "dreamer" who is divorced from pragmatic life (Cochran, 1995). King's ethics are seen as unrealistic and unattainable.

With the young being given such a polemic education, it is not surprising that this generation has an unfavorable view of nonviolence. The tutoring they have received presents peace advocates in a negative light. Hence, to change the present course of violent behavior, the thinking patterns must be changed. Education's paradigm and cognitive message must become more inclusive and appreciative of those who have chosen peace. Nonviolence must be recorded in a positive light. Its accomplishments must be recorded as a component of the historical mainstream. This reform of education must include the media as well as the classroom. Television must cease from glorifying violence while ridiculing peaceful overtures. Those who choose to live an altruistic, self-disciplined life must be given fair treatment and not portrayed as having strange, abnormal personalities.

Particularly, in the case of African Americans, their history must be taught. The only way to properly evaluate the present plight of black people is to compare it to the past. Without knowledge of where one has been, it is impossible to know if one is progressing or retrogressing. Without knowledge of the past in all of its manifestations, one will be ill-equipped to choose good over evil and distinguish heroes from heretics.

These corrective strategies are offered in the belief that nonviolence is the only sensible alternative that civilization has in resolving its problems. Without this higher form of resolution, humanity will be doomed to a barbaric, archaic modus operandi of bloodshed. The outdated practices of war and violence will have no place in the new sophisticated order of life. Hence, nonviolent leadership is not only still relevant, but it is needed now more than ever to preserve and prepare the young for future challenges.

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